

## Does the Bible Really Say That?

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The Bible is an amazing book. It is the collection of a large number of ancient writings, written over some 1,900 years, involving numerous authors (and collaborations of authors), brought together by a complex and lengthy process of identification, scholarship, textual criticism, finally consummating in a reverential recognition judged by the Christian church-at-large as possessing sufficient evidence to be called “divinely inspired” while still (and importantly) retaining its plain and blunt humanity. It has enjoyed a long history of international popularity, publication, translation, and profitable distribution, in countless languages. By any metric, the Holy Bible is the most published “book” in world history.

In graduate studies, on the most basic level, Bible study is responsibly examined with a three-point initial strategy: observation, interpretation, application. The study of Christian scripture should be logically commenced in *that* order (although in practical ministry and on an existential level the order is often jumbled, with application at the first, and the step of careful “observation” often forgotten.) This neglect is one trigger and can often become tinder for spiritual abuse, inflicted on victims under the guise of spiritual authority or “ministry.” A simple chart, with important sub-considerations listed, too:

<b>OBSERVATION</b>	historical background info
	language aspects
	contextual considerations
<b>INTERPRETATION</b> ("hermeneutics")	schools of thought
	presuppositions and assumptions
	consistency
<b>APPLICATION</b>	relevance concerns
	timelessness
	authority and power

There is a simple elegance in just knowing what the Bible says without rushing to quickly to interpretation or application. As fundamental as that may seem, the use of Bible quotations without first paying close attention to what is being said can so easily (and so often has) led to at best a reckless/irresponsible interpretation and at worst to abusive application.

A similar review of the dangers of misquotation, misinterpretation and misapplication can also be easily imagined around the use of the Quran, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedic hymns, the Book of Mormon, The *Watchtower* magazine, and other religious writings considered around the world to be authoritative. The scope of this book however, and this chapter, is directed at biblical usages.

Three biblical examples will illustrate:

In the Hebrew Bible we have in Deuteronomy 14:3-8,  
“You shall not eat any abomination. These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep. Every animal that parts the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cloven you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock badger, because they chew the cud but do not part the hoof, are unclean for you. And the pig, because it parts the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch.”

3 לֹא תֹאכַל כָּל-תוֹעֵבָה:  
4 זֹאת הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ שֹׁר שֶׁה כְּשָׂבִים וְשֶׁה עֲזִים:  
5 אֵיל וְצִי וְיַחְמֹר וְאֶקָּו וְדִישָׁן וְתֹאז וְזֶמֶר:  
6 וְכָל-בְּהֵמָה מִפִּרְסֵת פִּרְסָה וְשִׁסְעַת שִׁסְעַת שְׁתֵּי פִרְסוֹת מַעֲלַת גֵּרָה  
בַּבְּהֵמָה אֹתָהּ תֹאכְלוּ:  
7 אֲךְ אֶת־זֶה לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמַּעַלֵי הַגֵּרָה וּמִמִּפְרִי־הַפִּרְסָה הַשְּׂסוּעָה  
אֶת־הַגָּמֵל וְאֶת־הָאֲרִנְבָּת וְאֶת־הַשֶּׁפֶן כִּי־מַעֲלָה גֵרָה הֵמָּה וּפִרְסָהּ לֹא  
הַפְּרִיסוּ טְמֵאִים הֵם לָכֶם:  
8 וְאֶת־הַחֲזִיר כִּי־מִפְרִיס פִּרְסָה הוּא וְלֹא גֵרָה טָמֵא הוּא לָכֶם מִבְּשָׂרָם  
לֹא תֹאכְלוּ וּבְנִבְלָתָם לֹא תִגְעוּ: 8

In the Gospel of Matthew (the first book of the New Testament) we have in chapter 5, verses 29 & 30:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown

into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

αὐτοῦ. <sup>29</sup> εἰ δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ὁ δεξιὸς σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔξελε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀπόληται ἓν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου βληθῇ εἰς γέενναν. <sup>30</sup> καὶ εἰ ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεὶρ σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔκκοψον αὐτήν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀπόληται ἓν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου εἰς γέενναν ἀπέλθῃ.

From the Pauline epistles (letters) we have “...and he [God] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...” Ephesians 4:11,12

πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα. <sup>11</sup> Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους, <sup>12</sup> πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, <sup>13</sup> μέχρι καταστήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως

First, Bible “books” were not originally written in English. They were written in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic (a cognate language with Hebrew) and Koiné Greek—to illustrate, note the examples. So, a gap of understanding confronts the reader right at the outset. The title of this chapter is “Does the Bible Really Say That?” And we are confronted with the challenge of translation from one of the ancient languages into modern English in order to get to the start of the matter—does the Bible say *what*? Fortunately, we are blessed with no few highly accurate and reliable modern English translations of the original writings. Only occasionally do we need to clarify a translation’s approach to an ancient text or offer alternative renderings. Usually, the specific meaning of a text is readily discernible in any of several good English translations. (So often in pastoral ministry I would be asked, “What does the Hebrew or Greek say?” to which the reply would be, for instance, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind”, just as it reads in English.)

Second, our *real* problem, as related to spiritual abuse comes with the next step: “Does the Bible Really Mean What it Says?” Or more bluntly, “How Seriously Do I Take What I Read in the Bible?”

In the Deuteronomy passage we are confronted with dietary restrictions, traditionally reported as coming directly from God. For ancient Israel, for some modern Jews and

for others who take a strict interpretation of this passage, this is law. Imposing these laws on people today is not necessarily abusive if the church member voluntarily and willingly complies of their own doing. But to make declining the consumption of rabbit, rock badger or pig an inviolable rule for “believers in our community” is to border on an abusive application of an ancient text. Yes, the Bible does say that. But the context and times of the passage (Israel, in the Sinaitic period) is an important interpretive aspect. What is said at one time does not necessarily hold in permanent application for all time.

In Matthew’s report of the words of Jesus himself, the answer to the question, “does the Bible say that?” is of course, yes. It does say that. But if Jesus intended his disciples to employ a strictly literal application then there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-handed disciples in the world. Clearly Jesus intended that a serious attempt at self-discipline be made by his followers, to thwart the temptation to peer sinfully or to act sinfully.

More problematic and perhaps more immediately relevant to the current issue of spiritual abuse, is what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church. Specifically, the notion of top leadership being given by God to the church can be twisted and used to validate abusive protocols. Paul intends this realization of leadership “gifts” to be a blessing to the church, not a curse. But the passage is sometimes used in an abusive way to compel church members or “community” members) to subject themselves to the leadership because the individuals *in* leadership have been placed their by God. Does the Bible say that God gave to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd-teachers (often translated “pastor-teachers”)? Yes, it does. But that does not license those specific gifted leaders to abuse their positions, to impose their authority, to diminish the importance and dignity of their church members or to extract an undue levy of compliance which the Bible does *not* specifically authorize.

Perhaps we can suggest two categories which relate to the question, “Does the Bible Really Say That?” The first, not within the scope of this book but worth mentioning, are the basic theological and philosophical posits offered within the pages of the Bible. There is one God. He is a trinity of three persons. Humankind has a fundamental problem and in concert, the biblical writers call it “sin.” God took the initiative to intervene and provide a solution to the problem. Israel’s promised chosen one, was Jesus of Nazareth. Historically these ideas are summarized in documents like the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, etc.

The second broad category of biblical statements might be the many behavioral injunctions and principles. Here, the Bible is full of all kinds of individual and communal ideas which are given to help, edify and govern the lives of Bible believers. No apostle ever intended his statements to be utilized by the leaders of subsequent generations for hurtful or abusive practices. But they have been, all too often.

In recent decades there has been a disturbing increase of testimony from thousands of people who have experienced abuse—usually by persons entrusted with leadership—engaging biblical statements, commands or ideas, super-extended into hard and fast rules. Although this contributor believes in the inspiration of the Bible, I also recognize its abuse by narcissistic or power-driven leaders, sometimes empowered within otherwise recognized and respected religious institutions. As for interpretation of the Bible, David Clark (*To Know and Love God*, Crossway, 2003) writes:

The purpose for interpreting the Bible, said Bernard Ramm in his classic text *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*) is edification—transforming lives and building Christian character. The process assumes God spoke in human categories, accommodating divine communication to human modes of thought. The result is that the main teachings of Scripture are generally clear to open-minded and open-hearted readers. The method presupposes that God’s revelation unfolds gradually and progressively. Thus, while God’s Word is not uniform, it is internally coherent. Given these assumptions, evangelical interpretation seems the literal sense of Scripture. This is not “letter-ism,” a stilted literalism that ignores historical tradition, cultural background, grammatical conventions, figures of speech, or literary genres. The method is much like what readers use to interpret other forms of literature. If I read a letter from my wife, for example, the meaning I seek is what *she* meant as she wrote. Ramm argued that the natural sense of the Bible need not exclude other secondary meanings. But any secondary meanings depend on the “literal stratum” of meaning so that this literal sense exerts control over—it guards against—a reader’s presupposed biases. This procedure is historical-grammatical interpretation.

These are some specific principles which can help to avoid abuse of biblical verses:

- Do the careful work of observing exactly what was said in a verse, as well as what was not said.

- Never take a Bible verse out of context; always become acquainted with who said it, to whom they said it and why they said it in the context during which it was written. It has often been said, “a text without a context is a pretext.”
- As for the original speaker/author, consider exactly who said it, what was said, and factor in a responsible interpretive context based on, for example, was it Moses, King David, the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus (as quoted by any of four apostolic writers), Peter, Paul, John? Each author has his own *sitz im leben* (setting in life) to be carefully noted. Do not tear a verse away from its writer or speaker and make it a stand-alone touchstone of truth unless it can be shown that this is how it was originally intended.
- Never interpret a Bible verse to mean something which the original author did not intend.
- Official denominational interpretations can be consulted respectfully but should not be taken without critical review as pertains to church history or a questionable hermeneutical heritage.
- Become acquainted, at least in an introductory way, with the traditional ways in which certain large ecclesiastical bodies tend to interpret verses. Assembly of God Pentecostals tend to interpret certain verses one way; Roman Catholic ministries predictably take their own traditional interpretations of verses; Southern Baptists have their legacy of interpretation; Presbyterians are predictable for their hermeneutics too, etc. As well, the major cults are well known for their unique interpretations of many central biblical passages. It is helpful to gain at least a cursory familiarization with these habits of interpretation.
- Do not re-define the meaning of a text because it has become politically incorrect to maintain its historic interpretation. Lessening the authority of a text by adapting its meaning for political reasons is a dishonest abuse of the text itself.
- Before joining a community, which has a stated adherence and use of the Bible as a life-together basis, consider the ways in which its rules, protocols, expectations and disciplines are administered. How is dogmatism handled? Are leaders responsibly and vetted trained in the use of the Bible?
- Distinguish specific behavioral injunctions from generalized principles, i.e. a specific instruction given by Paul to Timothy for the Ephesian assembly (where Timothy was then ministering): “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (First Timothy 2:1,2) and an idea given by John to all Christians in general, “Whoever loves his brother

abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling” (First John 2:10).

Currently it has become popular to identify the many commands and injunctions in the Bible as relate to sexual behavior as being used in shaming members of religious communities, particularly females. There is perhaps a case to be made here, and several embittered books have been published recently which call into question any practice of shaming, under the guise of the promotion of sexual purity. We admit that this can certainly happen, but the temptation can rapidly become a diminishment or re-interpretation of the standards that the Bible *does* establish and promote.

Much more could be talked about under this heading, but this is a brief summary of the problem of biblical interpretation and application as might be imposed in an abusive manner.